Individual Stress Management Coursework in Canadian Teacher Preparation Programs

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Abstract

Teacher stress is a significant issue facing the teaching profession. The current paper explores individual stress management as a viable option to address stress in this profession. Specifically, Canadian teacher education programs are examined to identify the prevalence of pre-service teacher education courses focused on individual stress management. In light of the study findings, the author presents a curriculum framework for the development of a course focused on individual stress management for pre-service teachers as a means to facilitate increased availability of such coursework in Canadian teacher preparation programs. Potential areas of future research are also presented.

Résumé

Le stress des enseignants est un enjeu important auquel fait face la profession enseignante. Cet article explore la gestion individuelle du stress comme une option viable pour traiter le stress dans ce métier. Plus précisément, les programmes canadiens de formation des enseignants sont examinés afin de déterminer la prévalence des cours d'éducation des enseignants en formation axés sur la gestion du stress individuel. À la lumière des conclusions de cette étude, l'auteur présente un cadre pédagogique pour l'élaboration d'un cours orienté sur la gestion du stress individuel pour les futurs enseignants, comme un moyen de faciliter une meilleure disponibilité d'un tel cours dans les programmes canadiens de la formation des enseignants. Des domaines possibles pour de futures recherches sont également présentés.

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Teaching can be a stressful profession and with such stress can come teacher turnover, low teacher satisfaction, and high teacher burnout, along with negative physical and psychological health outcomes. Professionals, including teachers, are often left with little education or training in how to recognize and deal with stress. In preparing the current paper, the author explored Canadian teacher preparation programs to examine coursework devoted to stress management and found that few programs offered courses in this area. The current paper explores stress, especially within a teaching context, along with approaches to stress management. The author also presents a curriculum framework for stress management coursework within teacher preparation programs. Although such coursework has the potential to positively impact pre-service teachers while in the student role, the major focus of the current paper is on stress management preparation for pre-service teachers so that they can bring such training into their professional roles as teachers.

Stress Defined

Stress has been defined in a multitude of ways. Within the current paper, stress is defined as a combination of a stressor, stress reactivity, and the existence of strain (Greenberg, 2011) within the context of mediating variables. Stressors are environmental and/or psychological triggers that have the potential to activate our stress responses. Stress reactivity is the activation of our stress response. There are various ways in which people's stress responses can become activated in the face of stressors, but the most common conceptualization of such activation is the 'fight or flight' response, in which the sympathetic nervous system becomes activated (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004). The sympathetic nervous system is the branch of the autonomic nervous system responsible for expending energy and getting the body ready for a 'fight or flight' response (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004). Many stress management strategies are geared toward exerting conscious control over this system, which was for a long time considered an involuntary system (Greenberg, 2011). Finally, strain is defined as the outcome(s) of stress reactivity, such as illness or behavioral change.

A key consideration within this definition involves mediating variables (Lazarus, 1966, 1999). Such variables serve to reduce potential stress reactivity and strains, when encountering stressors, or they can potentially compound stressors and increase potential stress reactivity and strains. There are various examples of such mediating variables (e.g., self-talk and appraisal, social support, personality, and temperament). Often such mediating variables serve as useful guideposts for the development of an individualized stress management program.

Teaching has been shown in the literature to be stressful for many teachers, particularly new ones. The stressful nature of this profession is a complex one, which will now be discussed in some detail.

Stress and Teaching

Several Canadian studies have been conducted that have suggested teaching can be perceived as a stressful profession by its members (e.g., Dibbon, 2004; Schaefer, 2001; Younghusband, 2000). Various reasons have been presented to explain the potentially stressful nature of teaching. Examples include too many perceived demands along with a lack of perceived resources (e.g., heavy paperwork, student tracking, administrative tasks), work related changes associated with extra or different responsibilities (e.g., inclusion, higher class sizes), new programming implementations with little in-servicing or training, curriculum changes/restructuring with little in-servicing, insufficient preparation time to prepare for changes, perceived pressures to become involved in school activities outside of regular teacher duties (especially among new teachers), and long work hours (i.e., due to too many demands to complete during regular working hours) (Dibbon; Drago et al., 1999; Montalvo, Bair, & Boor, 1995). Teachers can also experience role ambiguity (i.e., uncertainty of role), especially when they are beginning their careers and also when major role changes arise. In addition, teachers can sometimes experience role conflict (e.g., competing expectations regarding the role of the teacher from various stakeholders such as principals, colleagues, parents, society, and the individual teacher). Student behavior has also been reported as a factor explaining teacher stress and teacher exhaustion (Jacobsson, Pousette, & Thylfors, 2001; Wisniewski and Gargiulo, 1997). In addition, teachers perceive a lack of parental involvement/support along with the presence of parents who are confrontational and abusive (especially when there is a lack of administrative support in dealing with such parents), translating into teacher stress.

Research has highlighted a number of potential strains associated with teacher stress. Teachers who become overwhelmed, hopeless, and unsupported may actually leave the profession. Turnover costs can be significant for the profession, society, and individual teachers. Stress can also cause teacher absenteeism, burnout, and various physical and psychological illnesses. Stress can also detract from teacher effectiveness in the classroom. Teachers may not have the energy to develop novel/creative classroom approaches to learning/management. Teacher stress may serve to put up emotional barriers between teachers and their students, negatively impacting student-teacher relations (Wisniewski and Gargiulo, 1997; Younghusband, 2000). Research has also highlighted the potential spillover of occupational stress into personal home life for teachers (Dinham & Scott, 2000; Younghusband, 2000). The end result is that occupational teacher stress can result in multiple strains on teachers.

As seen, there are a number of potential stressors, and strains associated with such stressors, within the teaching profession. Although such stressors/strains can be viewed from various intervention lenses or perspectives, the emphasis in the current paper is on individual stress management.

Individual Stress Management

One approach to dealing with stress is individual stress management. Individual stress management reflects learning about the nature of stress, understanding how to recognize stress, and developing strategies to prevent stress, along with interventions to

address existing stress. Stress management strategies are broad and cover a range of areas such as: cognitive and perceptual (e.g., self-talk, problem solving), affective and emotional (e.g., emotional regulation, emotional intelligence), physiological (e.g., exercise, breathing, and relaxation), and behavioral (e.g., teacher time-out, time management).[1] Research has supported individual stress management as an effective approach to the management of stress (see Blonna, 2007 and Greenberg, 2011 for reviews). Unfortunately, professionals, including teachers, are often left with little education or training for how to recognize and deal with stress. What research has been conducted suggests that providing practicing teachers with stress management training can reduce their levels of stress (e.g., Lapp & Attridge, 2000; Nassiri, 2005; Zude, Ji, Junyu, & Zude, 2004). Unfortunately, there is little guarantee that practicing teachers will have access to such training. Some promising research findings suggest that incorporating stress management training into curriculum for professionals entering stressful professions (e.g., medical doctors) can have highly positive outcomes (e.g., Bragard, Etienne, Merckaert, Libert, & Razavi, 2010). Indeed, a few studies have been conducted that have explored stress management education for pre-service teachers. However, such studies have tended to focus on stress management intervention for the purposes of reducing pre-service teacher *anxiety* toward teaching (Munday, Windham, Cartwright, & Bodenhamer, 1995; Payne & Manning, 1990) as opposed to reducing *stress*, which are two different constructs. Other works (Black & Frauenknecht, 1997; Winzelberg & Luskin, 1999) have focused on components of a comprehensive stress management program and have demonstrated reductions to pre-service teacher stress levels. Given the stressful nature of teaching, the available evidence supporting individual stress management for professionals, including practicing teachers, and the lack of published papers in the area of comprehensive stress management education/training for pre-service teachers, the author was interested in examining existing stress management courses for pre-service teachers.

Study Purpose

Given the stressful nature of teaching, the harsh personal and professional implications of stress on teachers, and the strong research support for individual stress management education/training, the current paper explores the prevalence of formal stress management education courses (defined as courses that appear in university calendars or faculty websites as sanctioned university courses) in Canadian teacher preparation programs. The author was interested in determining how many universities offering teacher preparation degrees made coursework in this area available within the Education program(s). The secondary purpose was to provide a curriculum framework for the development of such courses in teacher preparation programs.

[1] It is recognized that significant overlap exists between cognitive, affective, physiological, and behavioural interventions and prevention strategies; however, such distinctions are useful for instructional purposes.

Methodology

The current study involved an examination of online academic course calendars and websites from Canadian universities. In line with a content analysis framework, the author identified the specific content dimensions or characteristics in question and formulated specific rules for how such characteristics would be identified and recorded (Berg, 2004). Data was taken from the course calendars/websites and recorded in tables. Triangulation occurred through two separate analyses, by two separate graduate research assistants. What follows is a description of the data obtained and the processes involved in obtaining this data.

The first step involved identifying all Canadian universities and colleges. This was accomplished through examining the lists of Canadian universities and colleges on the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada website[2], as well as the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, Directory of Universities, Colleges and Schools in the Provinces and Territories of Canada[3]. Following this, provincial and territorial government websites were examined for lists of universities and colleges within each province and territory. These individual provincial and territorial website lists were cross-referenced with the original lists from the above noted websites to help to ensure accurate and complete Canadian university and college lists.

The second step involved identifying the subset of universities and colleges that offered teacher preparation programs. For the purpose of the current paper, all teacher preparation programs were included, including programs that offered partial education degrees. Program websites and program calendars for each university and college were examined for the presence of teacher preparation programs. The third step included an examination of academic course calendars and university pre-service education program websites to examine which pre-service education programs offered coursework in the area of individual stress management. The examination involved identifying course descriptions focused on "teacher or occupational stress." The emphasis was on finding courses that focused on "preventing" stress (e.g., developing a healthy lifestyle), "assessing or identifying" stress (e.g., measuring or evaluating stress), "understanding" stress (e.g., studying various stressors, stress reactivity, strains), or "intervening" into stress (e.g., learning interventions to cope with or eliminate stress). Importantly, the course needed to be purposefully focused, or explicitly focused, on all or some of the above noted areas for it to be included. The point here is that many courses could be considered as impacting teacher stress (e.g., a methodology course focused on teaching strategies would have the potential to further prepare a teacher and thus potentially impact stress); however, the purpose of this examination was on identifying coursework that explicitly focused on individual stress management. In addition, there was also an examination of how much emphasis was placed on stress within any given course (e.g., was it a course that focused solely on stress or was it a course that included many topics, with one or two focused on stress). Only courses that seemed to have a major[4] emphasis

[2] http://www.aucc.ca/can_uni/our_universities/index_e.html

[3] http://www.cicic.ca/664/directory-of-universities-colleges-and-schools-in-canada.canada

[4] Given that the author was examining course descriptions, which are often very short in nature, it was difficult to determine how much emphasis would actually be spent in courses on stress management related

on stress management were included in this analysis. There was also an examination of coursework in terms of whether the courses were mandatory or elective based.

A graduate level research assistant conducted an initial review of all identified teacher preparation programs. This student explored academic calendars and websites for the various programs using the content analysis rules that are noted above. The student created a table outlining her findings on the various programs. Following this initial review, a second graduate-level research assistant performed a secondary review of all calendars and websites to improve the likelihood that all appropriate courses were identified. This was accomplished through an initial read of each document, as well as a computerized search of each document for the above noted keywords. This second student also created a table of her results. The author then reviewed the results from the two searches and made final decisions regarding which courses should be included in the analysis (i.e., which courses contained a minimum of a 50% emphasis on stress management related topics).

Results

Fifty-four English (or bilingual) Canadian universities and/or colleges with teacher preparation programs were examined in the current study. The majority of the universities and/or colleges housing these teacher preparation programs were public institutions, with the minority being private entities. Many of these programs contained multiple degree routes (e.g., elementary, intermediate/secondary). Of the programs examined, five universities offered a course that maintained a major focus on individual stress management through their education programs. Such coursework tended to be elective-based. In addition, the majority of these courses maintained a heavy focus on physical fitness and exercise, some tending to be mainly directed toward physical education students. Coursework in this area also tended to have a health education focus.

There were several universities that offered coursework in health and wellness areas (e.g., exercise, nutrition), most notably in physical education, health education, and counseling streams but that did not make stress management an explicit intentional focus (for 50% or more of such courses) within the course description and, thus, were not included. There were also a number of programs that offered formal professional seminars to students with varying year-to-year topics. In addition, programs also tended to offer students practical teaching opportunities in the form of internships, practica, student teacher days, observation days, etc. Thus, it is possible that stress management topics could be potentially included in such seminars or practice teaching opportunities, although no evidence of this existed on program websites offering such seminars and/or practice teaching opportunities. In addition, some programs offered courses in areas such as effective communication, human relationships, personality and human development theories, and professional helping/counseling; however, these did not tend to emphasize stress management and, thus, such coursework was also not included.

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topics. Thus, the author used a general rule of 50% or greater whereby if over half of the course description was focused on stress management related topics it was included in the current analysis.

Discussion

Teaching can be a stressful profession. The implications of such stress are significant for the individual teacher, his/her students, and the school system, as well as for society overall. Teachers need ways to understand, prevent, identify, and address stress. Stress management interventions have been demonstrated as effective ways to address personal as well as occupational stress (Greenberg, 2011; Lapp & Attridge, 2000; Nassiri, 2005; Zude et al., 2004). One way to ensure teachers obtain such skills is through the development of formal coursework within teacher preparation programs that train students in stress management. As seen above, few Canadian education programs contain courses that focus on individual stress management. Expanding coursework in this area has the potential to help equip pre-service teachers with critical skills that would assist them throughout their teaching careers. The following discussion focuses on a potential curriculum framework for such a stress management course.

Course Objectives

The overarching objective of such a course is to help students develop self-management plans to address stress management and learn information and skills to help them successfully implement that plan. In the author's own experience of offering such a course, it is important to set objectives around acquiring foundational knowledge of stress, its manifestations, and its impacts. Much of this centers on the teacher and the teaching profession; however, general conceptualizations and implications of stress are also relevant. Additional course objectives include learning about research informed practices associated with the prevention, assessment, and intervention of stress.

Course Topics

Introduction. It is important to spend time at the beginning of such a course helping students build student-to-student and student-to-professor relationships and to feel comfortable and safe. This is a course in which students will be asked to take risks and potentially engage in activities that go beyond what is typical of academic courses. In such instances, it is important to give students choice, and thus avoid mandating students to do things they are not ready for or are uncomfortable doing. It also highlights the importance of helping students feel safe, comfortable, and connected within the classroom, maybe even more so than in what could be defined as more mainstream academic courses. Spending time early in the course engaged in icebreaker activities (e.g., interview a classmate on what he/she does to deal with stress or what he/she finds stressful) can be a worthwhile investment of time. Discussion early in the course concerning what students feel they would like to take away from the course is also important. Spending 10 minutes in open discussion on this topic can be useful, but also providing a private and even anonymous mechanism is important (e.g., folded piece of paper in a private box the professor reviews between classes). In the author's own experience, these methods have resulted in some interesting topics that would have otherwise gone unconsidered (e.g., death and dying issues in the classroom such as when a student's parent or sibling has died or when a student has died).

Foundational knowledge. During the first few classes, this author feels it is important to emphasize some background content in relationship to stress and stress management. Tackling definitional issues, understanding mediating variables (e.g., personality and temperament, cognitive appraisal), exploring student perceptions of stress and stress management, and discussing strains associated with stress are important. Part of this foundational emphasis is on theories and research associated with stress. This author also focuses on teacher statistics associated with stress (e.g., Dibbon, 2004; Schaefer, 2001; Younghusband, 2000), but does avoid spending excessive time on this topic so as to avoid intimidating or scaring students. One potential exercise that has proven to be a useful way to get students engaged and working together is to have them respond to fill-in-the-blanks questions within small groups (e.g., 'What percentage of teachers do you think report teaching as stressful?').

Assessment activities. Various assessment strategies can be explored in such a course in order to help students identify stress and also identify risk factors (e.g., personality factors, environmental, and work-related factors) for such stress. A variety of personal and occupational survey-based measures (e.g., Pettegrew & Wolf, 1982) can be explored and even administered. Students are given opportunities to reflect, through journal writing, on how assessment of their own lifestyles, and stress in their own lives, is impacting them. Assessment of personal mediating variables (e.g., personality, environment, social support) is emphasized, as this can help students to think about their own personal stress management goals for the course. For example, exploring personality characteristics (e.g., type A versus type B; Hardy personality; learned helplessness; locus of control orientation) can serve the student well in this early stage in the course. In addition, micro-skills (e.g., reflection of feeling, open-ended questions, paraphrases) along with guidance in observation (e.g., behavioral observation, paralinguistics, non-verbal communication, noting cues in submitted work) can be emphasized and practiced, especially in the context of helping pre-service teachers gain skills around assessing and understanding their future students' stress. Role playing exercises can be useful practice guides for such learning.

Motivation and goal setting. Students can be asked to reflect on motivation. What characterizes motivation for persistence and change? What is necessary for motivation to be realized? How have you observed motivation for change in your own life? How will you help your own students realize motivation for change and growth? This discussion can be framed in the broader motivation for change literature (e.g., Miller & Rollnick, 2002; Miller & Rose, 2009; Prochaska & Norcross, 2001) with an application to stress management. There is also a discussion around goal setting in the course. Goals help students to guide their stress management program, give them a marker to evaluate their program, and help to motivate them. Cormier and Cormier (1998) provide a useful conceptualization of goal setting that can be taught to students at this stage. Attempting to personalize motivation and goal setting for students is a key focus. Thus, teaching the theory and skills behind motivation and goal setting are important, but helping students to actually develop and harness their own motivation and set their own goals is critical in the context of this course. The idea here is to help

students to actually make a commitment to change and laying out a realistic plan to make that change possible.

Prevention and Intervention. The major emphasis of the course is on learning prevention and intervention strategies aimed at managing stress. There are many strategies that could be included in such a course. In the interest of offering a conceptual framework for such strategies, the author will explore some examples of potential strategies that may fall into the following categories: cognitive and perceptual, affective and emotional, physiological, and behavioral.

1. Cognitive and perceptual: This category can include areas such as cognitive appraisal (e.g., primary appraisal of a potential stressor) (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 for a review), inaccurate self-talk (e.g., irrational beliefs, self-defeating beliefs, absolute statements), along with cognitive restructuring techniques (e.g., locating the evidence, experimentation) (see Ellis, 2000; Ellis, 2001; Ellis, Gordon, Neenan, & Palmer, 1997; Greenberger & Padesky, 1995 for reviews), problem solving (see Hiebert, nd; Alderson, nd for reviews) stress inoculation (see Meichenbaum, 1985 for a review), and mindfulness (Gold et al., 2010; Martín-Asuero & García-Banda, 2010).
2. Affective and emotional: This category can include areas such as visualization (see Blonna, 2007; Davis, Eshelman, & McKay, 2008 for reviews), emotional regulation and emotional intelligence (e.g., Bohlin, Durwin, & Weber, 2009; Roberts, MacCann, Matthews, & Zeidner, 2010), and humor (see Greenberg, 2011 for a review).
3. Physiological: This category can include areas such as exercise and nutrition (see Greenberg, 2011 for a review), diaphragmatic breathing (see Davis et al., 2008 for a review), relaxation training (e.g., Progressive Muscle Relaxation, body scanning, autogenics) (see Greenberg, 2011; Harris, 2003 for reviews), and hypnosis/enhanced suggestibility/self induction (see Alderson, 2004 for a review).
4. Behavioral: This category can include areas such as time management (see Greenberg, 2011 for a review), teacher time outs (i.e., applying time out principles to teacher anger and stress), boundary setting and conflict resolution (see Deutsch & Coleman, 2000; Girard & Koch, 1996 for reviews), and assertiveness training (Duckworth & Mercer, 2006).

It is important to note that the above categories are not meant to be mutually exclusive and that many of these interventions could potentially fit into multiple categories. As can be seen, there is a large emphasis on actual skill development in this course. Thus, practice time (e.g., in the lab) is important. Getting students engaged in course content is critical. Inspirational guest speakers who can come into class and speak about their own stress management experiences and skills in a classroom context can be highly valuable. As well, taking students out of the classroom on trips (e.g., to a park and demonstrating mindfulness, or into a gym and actually doing physical exercise) can serve to enhance student engagement. In addition, although much of the emphasis in such a course tends to be on the individual student learning stress management, there can also be

an emphasis placed on students learning such skills so that the students can model and teach stress management in their own classrooms to their own students.

Course Assignments and Evaluation

Assignments in the course should provide a measure of skill acquisition and application, if possible. The author has found regular and ongoing reflective journals to be a useful assessment tool. As well, an academic paper on an area of stress not covered in the course allows students opportunity to further personalize their experiences within the course. Finally, group presentations (i.e., maybe for the final three classes) on topics not covered in the course are also highly valuable to help students gain depth of knowledge in additional areas of stress management and to provide an opportunity to practice their teaching skills (along with their stress management skills) in a safe and supportive environment. As with all teaching, ensuring ample time toward the end of the course (and indeed throughout the course) for opportunity to debrief, set future goals, and evaluate what has been done to date is critical.

Study Limitations

The current paper focused on program websites and university calendars, with an emphasis on course descriptions. Course descriptions are often short and to the point. Thus, it is possible that important information was not included in such course descriptions. It should also be noted here that the current study is a gross estimate of the number of individual stress management courses offered in Canadian teacher preparation programs and does not focus on the actual quantity of time spent in such courses on stress management topics. It is further recognized by the author that stress in the teaching profession can be potentially addressed in a multitude of ways (e.g., strong preparation in areas of focus, positive student teaching experiences, effective and supportive mentorship, regular and well-timed teacher in-servicing, consideration of broader system issues such as teacher empowerment and respect in the school/district, fair and equitable workload, work-life balance), with individual stress management being one option. It was beyond the scope or purpose of the current paper to explore a multitude of mechanisms to address stress in this profession. As well, as highlighted above, much research supports individual stress management. Finally, it is recognized that many of the prevention and intervention strategies suggested in the current paper require specialized training/preparation and, thus, universities would need to ensure the availability of appropriate faculty expertise in order to offer such coursework.

Conclusions and Future Research Directions

Stress is a significant risk for teachers. Preparing pre-service teachers to prevent, recognize, and address stress is an important component of teacher preparation. Unfortunately, it appears that few Canadian teacher preparation programs offer such coursework to pre-service teachers. The current paper highlights individual stress management training/education, at the pre-service level, as one potential route to help prepare teachers to deal with stress. Future research should continue to explore this very important topic, including further empirical examination of such coursework and training

on teacher stress related outcomes (e.g., stress related strains), an investigation around pre-service teacher perspectives of such stress management coursework, as well as further research on the nature of stress itself in this profession.

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